DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 111 003 CS 202 218

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TITLE Variations of Syntax and Vocabulary in Children's Writing.
PUB DATE Apr 75
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference on the Language Arts in the Elementary School (7th, Boston, Massachusetts, April 11-13, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Composition (Literary); Composition Skills (Literary); Elementary Education; Grammar; *Language Development; Language Research; *Language Skills; *Syntax; Teaching Methods; *Writing Skills; Written Language

ABSTRACT

To write well is not a singular ability; it utilizes critical thinking, creativity, and a feeling for language. An examination of a number of pieces of writing by elementary school pupils shows that some are highly imaginative while others are informative reports, simple statements of events, colorful descriptions, or various forms of poetry. Style is generally informal and relaxed, as it relates closely to speech and implies that the reader or listener is interested in what is being presented. As the pupil becomes more aware of the English language and its syntactical structure, this knowledge can help give form to ideas. The question naturally arises whether the study of grammar can help improve writing. Over the past decade attempts to prove that the study of grammar can improve writing were not significant, but research on generative grammar instruction increased the proportion of well-formed sentences and the complexity of sentence patterns. More recently, a study reported that sentence-combining practices have a favorable effect on the writing skills of students. (RB)

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Variations of Syntax and Vocabulary in Children's Writings

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Control over language is first gained through talking. Children learn the accepted patterns of language through oral experimentation and conversations with others. Likewise, mastery over written communication is gained through writing which begins with the child's scribbling on paper and the simple recording of ordinary talk by mother or teacher and continues to develop as the indivudual engages in the careful editing and rewriting of a composition. As the child engages in the processes of talking, writing, and rewriting, he develops an understanding and appreciation for language and its syntactical possibilities as well as its word choices. Knowledge of how to construct sentences, to select words to portray precise meanings and to transform cloudy, dull impressions into clear, sharp language can be discovered, explored and demonstrated by children through varied talking and writing activities and assignments.

Talking makes less demands on the syntactical sub-system of language than does writing. When talking, the sentence construction is more open. The speaker uses mazes, repetitions, false starts, and much oral editing as he watches for clues of understanding or confusion on the part of his listener. He can adjust the syntactical structures and word choices as he is talking. Because syntactical requirements in oral communication are more flexible and more easily amended or altered, the speaker can focus his attention, thought, and effort to the clarification of his ideas. The speaker, for example, focuses on the plot of his story as he tells the sequence of events in the story; he includes descriptive elements that will add meaning to the theme of his story.

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CS 202 218

Writing requires a greater awareness of the basic sentence structures, of the degree sentences can be elaborated for effective prose, and of the ellipses acceptable in poetry as well as the ability to mentally organize ideas in accordance with his writing vocabulary. Because writing is more permanent and requires more time to produce than talking, it imposes strong demands upon the writer. Yet the demands are not impossible; young children can enjoy writing.

Teachers often bridge the interval between talk and writing with reading aloud to pupils selections from the world of children's literature thereby helping them become acquainted with the syntactical style and carefully chosen words characteristic of carefully edited prose. Concomitant to this would be the use of experience charts and dictated stories transcribed by teacher, aide, or another pupil. These transitional activities have value not only at the primary level but at the more advanced levels as well. For the older pupil the tape recorder affords one way in which dictation may be retained while other possibilities are contemplated. The oral exploration of an idea can be recorded allowing the pupil to listen, later making his own choices of content, syntax, and vocabulary. Finally the composition assumes a form worthy of sharing with others.

The need exists for the teacher to be alert to use the natural sentence patterns of children when recording stories about a common class experience and not fall into the habit of using stereotyped, monotonous, or repetitious syntactical patterns. If the teacher feels it necessary to use repetitive sentence patterns and a limited vocabulary for beginning reading instruction, she should plan concomitant writing experience or listening activities that will illustrate a more expansive use of sentence patterns and vocabulary.

One teacher who recognized the desirability of letting her pupils hear a variety of language patterns while pursuing the topic, Homes, began by showing a filmstrip, The Three Little Pigs. The class then recorded on a chart their comments on houses.

Our Houses

We all live in houses.
Some of us live in brick houses.
Some of us live in wood houses.
Some of us live in block houses.

Jimmy lives in a trailer.
It is a special house.
It is metal and it has wheels.
Some of us live in stone houses.

The teacher concluded the discussion for that day by reading The Little House, by Virginia Burton. She was aware that before children can use or move freely from one sentence pattern to another in their own talking or writing, they first need to hear these patterns. These patterns need to become natural and familiar to their ears. Listening to a variety of sentence patterns precedes the writing of these patterns.

To put one's ideas, experiences, or one's inner thoughts and interpretation of life and events on paper testifies to the grasp one has of language. Writing, rewriting, and editing become the avenue through which control over the various aspects of language can be discovered, illustrated, or further refined. It is not isolated, factual knowledge about language that needs to be encouraged and taught at the elementary school level but rather countless opportunities must be provided to let pupils engage in many types of writing so that not only skills

of spelling, punctuation, or paragraphing are developed in a meaningful manner, but also the ability to organize and reorganize personal experience, to select pertinent details for accurate descriptions, to come to grips mentally with an idea or emotion and to express these clearly in writing. To write well is not a singular ability; it utilizes critical thinking, creativity, and a feeling for language.

Because children learn to write by writing, classroom activities and teaching units should include a time for writing. Sometimes the teacher will initiate a writing situation while at other times children will write on their own. Ideally there will be a secluded quiet area in the classroom where paper and pencil, dictionary, thesaurus, and other writing aids are available for children to use when they want to write.

All the writing that pupils do is not the same type. There are many ways to classify children's writing. ~~For example, Alvina Burrows describes two types of writing--practical and personal--based on the situation which gave rise to the writing act. But~~ If we were to examine a number of pieces of writing by elementary school pupils some would be highly imaginative selections while others would be informative reports, simple statements of events, colorful descriptions, or various forms of poetry. Now each of these selections can be examined and classified according to its function or particular purpose it serves. Let us begin by noting the characteristics of the most common type of pupil writing found in the elementary grades and illustrated by the following selections. Here the style is informal and relaxed as it relates closely to speech and implies the reader or listener is interested in what is being presented. This first selection was written after the class had visited a farm community and stopped at the town park where they rode a small train around the area.

The Train Ride

I liked the train ride the best.

I liked the train ride best because when you took a curve you would swing around the corner and almost fall off. We were going so fast that the wind would just blow you down.

Jack was trying to hop on but he kept having to run faster. Then he gave up.

Teacher: Mrs. Karol Prentice,

Champaign, IL

Basketball

I wish the referees would watch very closely at basketball games. They don't call the plays that are fouls, and do call the ones that aren't fouls. I was at a game last night and I was going to block a lay-up by touching the ball and not the man who was shooting. The referee called a foul on me.

Randy

Teacher: Mrs. Dorothy Hill,

Bloomington, Indiana

Here is another story illustrating emotional involvement with a personal experience.

The Lucky Penny

One night I came home. My jacket
was torn. And we were going out
that night. The shops were closed.
And I found a lucky penny but
Dad said it was superstitious and
it was. The end.

Student writing displayed at National
Language Arts Conference in Boston

On Our Way

On our way to West Virginia I had lots of fun. When we were in the country we had a flat tire so we had to fix it. Then our battery ran down, so we had to walk to the next house to call a filling station. We had to wait till they got there, and when they did, they didn't bring their tools. They went back after them, and then fixed the car. Then we went to West Virginia.

Kathy

Teacher: Mrs. Dorothy Hill,
Bloomington, Indiana

In these selections the writer is simply expressing his thoughts or ideas or is describing an experience he had often including his interpretations of that happening. Of course expressive writing of this type is capable of much development and refinement. However, much of the writing of young children does not move greatly beyond the expression of emotion or of self-expression. In fact, much of the writing at the elementary level serves this function or purpose. This type of writing helps children to come to grips with their environment. Children live in an ego-centered world so their writing reflects this closeness to self.

Expressive writing is creative. In a degree all forms of writing, are creative. Nevertheless straightforward creativity is deeper than just the surface creation of a sentence or paragraph which has never been written exactly that way before. Neither can genuine creativity be equated with pretentious imaginative bits of writing that may nevertheless be original yet does not come from a depth of understanding, intensive personal involvement, or reorganization of life experiences to gain a new perspective or insight. Genuine creativity comes from deep down inside the writer and results in a new view or relationship of the apparent or commonplace. The first-grade lad who wrote the following original lines had fun with language as he gained control over sentence patterns appropriate to the nature of poetry yet the lines like the sparkle of creativity or deep emotional involvement with his subject.

I like ducks.
Quack, quack they say.
I like the way they quack.
I'll DIE if I don't have ducks.
Mike

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

In contrast the next selection is also written by a pupil in the first grade. This pupil is writing about something she knows. She tells you where the new home was built and the precise visitors who come to call. She has given the specifics which are part of her own observations. This selection too is original but most important, it is sincere. It speaks from within the writer's own personal experience.

Our new house is very nice.
We built it on Lake Michigan.

We have visitors at our house.
Raccoons, deer, rabbits, squirrels and opposum.
And people too!

Sandy

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

The child moves quite easily from the expressive personal account or description to the poetic forms, such as, the poem, the story, or fanciful tale. Possibly an explanation for the ability to use these forms of poetic function at an early age is that children have been read poems and stories since early childhood and that they sense the relationship between the regularity of the world, its meter or beat as seen in the traffic light, and the rhythm between tension and release of life experience as felt through the anxieties of life and the relaxations found in reading literature and writing or painting. Here are a few examples of poetic function in which the content is of the expressive nature but it takes on the literary format.

Food

Yummy, Eatable

Mixing, Fixing, Eating

Drink, Appetizer, Main, Dessert

Slurping, Licking, Chewing

Sour, Burned

Starved

Susan

Teacher: Ann Cohn,

Champaign, Illinois

The Porcupine

I think to a baby Porcupine

That his mothers prickles

are I love you tickles

Elizabeth

Elizabeth Duff, Age 8, Essex, Mass.

The Christian Science Monitor, June 26, 1974

A Story

The chicken ran from his Mother.

He ran and ran.

He had 2 pieces of corn.

He met a turtle.

The turtle said I am going to eat you.

Please do not eat me.

I will give you some corn.

"Very well" said the turtle.

The chicken saw a fox.

The fox said I am going to eat you.

Please do not eat me.

I will give you my feather from my tail.

"Very well" said the fox.

The chicken ran to the chickenhouse.

John

Teacher: Virginia Hamilton

Lincoln, Nebraska

This last story has been modeled after "Little Black Sambo," a story read by the teacher to her first grade class. Although this piece lacks originality the young pupil has gained a sense of what comprises a story as seen through the eyes of a mature writer and he has used language to give shape to a literary experience. He has had an opportunity to "play around" with sentence patterns and story sequence and has gained a sense of accomplishment and pride in a bit

of completed work. One should not discourage such writing for its lack of creativity but recognize it forms the basis for more mature writing. Nancy Martin, a British teacher and researcher interested in composition writes,

> "However derivative their writing may seem, it should not be scorned, but regarded as a stage in the complex process of learning to come to terms with life." 1/

Artifical writing, producing little of quality, can be original and serve as a necessary stepping stone to more genuine sincere writing. Suggestions such as these by Kenneth Koch in Wishes, Lies and Dreams[2/]--or Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?[3/] offer little opportunity for children to give order or meaning to the world as they see it by helping them to observe, discover, write, and share from a personal commitment to a feeling or idea. Yet such an introduction to writing for those who have arrived in upper grade levels without having enjoyed the writing act can become the first step towards an awareness of what constitutes the process of writing.

The process of writing can be more valuable to some children than the product. The Whole Word Catalog[4/] prepared by the Teachers' and Writers' Collaborative gives many practical suggestions for stimulation of student writing. The authors of this publication recognize the flaws in their own approach, as well as that of Koch, to this artifical writing when they write:

1/ Nancy Martin, "Imitation or Originality?", in Young Writers Young Readers: An anthology of children's reading and writing. Edited by Boris Ford. London: Hutchinson and Co., 1967.

2/ Koch, Kenneth, Wishes, Lies and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1970.

3/ Koch, Kenneth, Rose, Where Did You Get That Red? Teaching Great Poetry to Children. New York: Random House, 1973.

4/ Brown, Rosellen, et al., The Whole Word Catalog. New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, Inc., 1972.

> "The formula quality of many of the assignments is one that encourages mindless mimicking by less inspired practitioners. Moreover, as we suggest in several other places in the catalog, formulas and gimmicks are fine openers but they can be a terrible dead end if one fails to move beyond them into more sustained, more independently initiated writing." p. 118

A third purpose or function of writing occurs when a writer sees an objective world outside himself which can be described in terms of facts, data, and theory. This function of writing is characteristic of the writing and language used by the scientist, researcher, or philosopher. In writing of this type much use is made of informing, stating, explaining, describing, persuading, or other purposes for writing. Writing of this type is the backbone of the major writing tasks assigned by teachers. Pupils are asked to describe science experiments or to prepare social science reports even though these writing tasks require considerable skill of observation, reading, selection, organization, writing, examining, and editing to prepare an acceptable product. Much teaching needs to be devoted on how to use reference materials, how to select essential information, and how this data is to be recorded or reported. The skills of critical reading and critical thinking become important in this function or writing. It is at this point in teaching and learning that examination of syntactical structures and vocabulary become valuable to pupils just as it does for adults engaged in this type of writing. Structure and meaning are correlative. Therefore the writer must have the necessary writing and thinking skills to set forth his exact message within the syntactical structures of the English language. All too often teachers have given pupils little preparation in this function of writing yet many class and individual assignments require just this type of writing.

These three functions of writing are described by Carol Burgess[5/] and other British researchers as existing on a continuum with the expressive function occupying the center and the poetic extending to one side with the transactional extending in the other direction. Thus the pupil may move from the expressive to the poetic or from the expressive to the transactional. These researchers see these three functions as not necessarily mutually exclusive but blend from one to the other. Perhaps one reason pupils have achieved poorly in composition is because teachers are not fully aware of these functions of writing and the particular skills required for successful writing within each function.

Composing involves basically the selection of words and sentence patterns to write in a meaningful way what one wants to communicate. As the pupil becomes more aware of the English language and its syntactical structure, these can help him give form to his ideas. Thus the question naturally arises whether or not the study of grammar can help pupils move from the expressive to the poetic or from the expressive to the transactional with greater ease, flexibility, and clarity of expression.

Over the past decade many attempts have been made to show that a study of grammar can improve student writing. But researchers found the effect of teaching traditional grammar was not significant; however, the Bateman and Zidonis Study reported that generative grammar instruction increased the proportion of well-formed sentences and the complexity of sentence patterns. The Miller and Nay study at the fourth grade level in 1968 reported that a series of regular oral practice activities and the writing of sentences based on cue sentences which

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5/ Burgess, Carol, et al., Understanding Children Writing. Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1973. pp. 18-19.

involved the manipulation of syntactic structure enabled the students to write more complex sentences and to use a greater number of words per structural unit.[6]

More recently the O'Hare study reported "that sentence combining practice that is in no way dependent on formal knowledge of a grammar has a favorable effect on the writing of seventh graders."[7]

O'Hare writes in a detailed report of his study, Sentence Combining: Improving Writing without Formal Grammar Instruction,

> Students exposed to sentence-building techniques could use these syntactic manipulative skills at the prewriting and rewriting stage in their work in composition. They were better able to "unchop" the choppy sentence and eliminate the run-on sentence...(p. 70)[8] Experienced in sentence manipulation and trained to think in rhetorical terms, they were in better position to make meaningful rhetorical choices because they would have a wider repertoire of syntactic alternatives from which to choose. (p. 71)[9]

Of particular interest is the fact that in these research studies, grammar was not taught directly--neither were grammatical terms used with the students. Students, instead, were given practice in manipulation of sentence structures by matching separated subjects and predicates, by combining sentences, by adding adverbial phrases to sentences, and by changing sentences to negatives, questions, or passives.

6/ Miller, B. D. and J. W. Nay, 1968 The Effect of Systematic Oral Exercises on the Writing of Fourth-grade Students. Research in English. 2:44-61.

7/ O'Hare, Frank. Sentence Combining: Improving Student Writing without Formal Grammar Instruction. Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1973. p. 68.

8/ Ibid. p. 70.

9/ Ibid. p. 71

Activities of this type can be done quite effectively in the elementary classroom. One second grade teacher, for example, read the story of The Golden Touch to her class. After a discussion of the plot and the recognition of the grief and remorse accompanying the king's greed, the children were asked to write the story in their own words and to arrange each sentence separately so these could be cut apart. The ideas of sequence was uppermost in Christie's mind as she wrote the following story. She knew one of her classmates would have the task of piecing the "puzzle" back together, so she wrote each sentence carefully. Notice how she has condensed the story, yet covered all the important points and placed them in sequential order. Note that this assignment generated simple subject-verb sentences.

King Midas

King Midas wanted to have the golden touch.

King Midas got the golden touch.

King Midas turned Mary Gold into gold.

God Bacchus came and told King Midas what to do.

King Midas spenkl water on Mary Gold.

Mary Gold was not gold.

Cristie Fosbender, Gr. 2, 1964, Meadow Lane School, Lincoln, Teacher: Ethel Sweet.

Further explorations in language can involve converting a given sentence written by pupils into different syntactical structures. Thus pupils can rewrite sentences moving from a longer sentence to a series of kernal sentences, from short sentences to the complex, from statements to questions, from active to passive

voice, etc. This type of manipulation of the pupils' own sentences illustrates the syntactical choices available to them in their own writing. Such activities need not imply only one way is acceptable but that the meaning one wishes to convey will determine word choice and sentence pattern.

In their concern for the conventions of spelling, teachers often restrict word choices or limit thinking rather than encouraging creativity. The development of a spelling consciousness and awareness of other written conventions should not be given major emphasis during time set aside for writing. When pupils are writing the teacher should be available for help, the pupils should feel free to use self-helps, and later the teacher and pupil can work out an individual method for improvement and instruction. Teachers who resort to writing words on the chalkboard that relate to the topic for a composition retard exploration and creative thinking. Even though pupils may suggest these words, the words tend to structure thinking and the stories or poems produced by the children take on an atmosphere of sameness. One teacher who had been following this practice of writing words on the chalkboard related to a given writing task substituted it by letting each pupil play around with words and write his own lists or phrases related to the topic on which he expected to write. She tells us:

> To gain variety in vocabulary the class sometimes settled down to make individual word lists, using the dictionary to compile a valid and interesting "box paints" at the top of the page before writing.[10/]

While as teachers, we tend to measure and evaluate the skills of written communication (spelling, vocabulary, punctuation, paragraphs) the composition is not just a flow of words on paper but includes the writer and the experience

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10/ Oregon ASCD Curriculum Bulletin. "Writing is the Funnest Thing: Teaching Creative Writing," August, 1973.

he had during its creation. It is this inner growth, the struggle to bring half formed thoughts into view, to clarify them through language and express these thoughts in precise words so that others can understand how he felt and perceived an experience that must be considered in the total evaluation. The topic, subject matter, and content of the selection can offer clues as to the manner in which the writing experience helped the child to grow emotionally and intellectually. He is discovering certain principles about himself, his culture, his place in society--and about his language which is also a part of his environment. Self-discoveries made during the act of writing are as important as the technical writing skills illustrated in the final composition.

As the child gains more experience with writing he discovers how to handle and control the written conventions in more mature ways. He learns how to think critically, how to seek relationships, how to use words to express moments of deep concern or involvement. The result is not complicated, muddled writing but rather clear, concise sentences without distractions. The following poem written by a Navajo boy while a high school junior sharpen the choices and doubts of life which he faced. His use of the Line, "Now, still a small boy," holds more than a single meaning. The listener senses a whole lifetime of experience in these nine lines.

Decision

A boy,
Thinking about the future
Or to be a muscle man.
Now, still a small boy
Remembering back to childhood:

Growing older,

Through school.

Now, still a small boy,

Not knowing what to do.[11]

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[11] Leland Begay, "Decision," in Arrow II edited by T. D. Allen, The Pacific Grove Press, 1970, p. 20.